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ABSTRACT

The involvement of state agencies in program discontinuance in higher education was studied, based on the responses of 46 agencies. It was found that 32 state agencies were actively involved in recommending, initiating, or enforcing actual discontinuances. The following eight categories of obstacles to program discontinuance were identified: legal aspects, interactive issues, economic issues, political issues, definitional shortcomings, attitudinal issues, procedural issues, and environmental issues. Among the strategies that were followed to cope with obstacles to program discontinuance were the following: announcing a new era that is advertised with a slogan such as "smaller and better"; developing program discontinuance guidelines; stimulating programmatic change via trade-offs (e.g., approving new programs without allocating additional funds); assisting in developing hiring ceilings; developing standards and norms for the purpose of lending objectivity to the decision-making process; and promoting the establishment of faculty retraining centers. A coping-process model and a time-order sequence for implementation are proposed, which consists of three phases: incentives to induce reduction, general coping devices, and rewards for the effective implementation of curricular retrenchment. Additionally, roles for the institutional researcher in the closure process may include the following: assist in conceptualizing a university-level program review process in line with the institution's degree of centralization or decentralization, and identify appropriate data and estimate the cost and time involved in retrieving and interpreting them. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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After years of curricular proliferation and an expectation of continuing growth in funding, the socioeconomic and demographic conditions warranting program expansion may have ceased to exist for most American colleges and universities. Predications for the 1980s seem to indicate that academic renewal, changes, and additions need to occur within constant, if not decreasing, resources. Thus, in view of the goal of retaining curricular flexibility and providing conditions for academic change for the next decade, reasons to reduce or discontinue academic programs of poor quality, low productivity, or questionable centrality are pervasive. While much attention has been placed on institutionally initiated program closures, relatively little research has been geared toward assessing the role and efforts of *agencies* for higher education in initiating and implementing curricular change in general and reductions in particular.

A comprehensive study on program reduction was undertaken by the author in 1979 to (a) determine the extent to which state agencies for higher education are involved in inducing curricular change, (b) analyze the state of the art of state-level program reduction, and (c) identify specific phenomena such as incentives, obstacles, coping mechanisms, and particular processes which seem to impact on the degree of effectiveness in bringing about programmatic changes and retrenchment.

The findings on currently existing obstacles in state-level retrenchment efforts, the identification of coping devices employed by agency staff to overcome some of these hindrances, and the sequencing of these devices in such a way that they would have optimal constructive impact on the change process are items of importance for both public and private institutions of higher education. Although the study focused on state agencies and their public four-year and graduate-institution constituencies, the application of the findings may not be limited to those sectors. Public *and* private institutions may want to consider adopting the study's recommendations whether the impetus to close programs comes from the state level or not.

During the past few years, research has been undertaken by Robert Barak and Robert Berdahl (1978) in the area of state-level program review. The project which is the subject of this paper has built upon their efforts. Additional ideas and guidance were found in literature on policy cycle analysis in general (Cameron, 1978; Bardach, 1978), and termination literature in particular (DeLeon, 1978, Behn, 1978). Particular mention is made here of DeLeon's research on barriers to policy/program termination and Behn's practical strategies and coping mechanisms for overcoming these obstacles. Literature on organizational change (Kaufman, 1971; Hirschman, 1970) and societal change and decline (Michael, 1968; Nisbet, 1971) was also considered.

Methodology

All state governing boards and coordinating agencies were invited to participate in the study, and forty-six state agencies chose to do so. The chief agency executive or academic officer in each state was interviewed by telephone. Questions focused on these areas: *de jure* and *de facto* program discontinuance authorities; review procedures, criteria, implementation mechanisms and appeal routes; definitions for program and program discontinuance, extent of discontinuations between 1975 and 1979 and their impact on faculty, students, budgets and agency-institutional relationships; obstacles encountered and coping mechanisms developed to overcome these, as well as existing agency-university incentive structures; and post-review and post-discontinuance impact assessments in relation to the states' higher education goals and long-range plans.

Analysis and Results

Thirty-two state agencies were found to be actively involved in recommending, initiating, or enforcing actual discontinuances. The events leading up to program discontinuance (initiation, review, decisions, appeal, implementation) did not "behave" like independent variables suited for variance analysis. Only two states indicated that a specific occurrence (variable) overshadowed the entire discontinuance process. Thus, process theory (Mohr, 1978) was chosen as the mode of analysis.

Process theory requires that a serial necessity exist between the events leading up to the "final cause" (e.g., discontinuances), that events display time-ordered characteristics, and that the final cause—in this case, program terminations and the degree of satisfaction related to implementation—reflect the compounding impact of the sequence of occurrences. The emergence of *obstacles* and the neglect of *incentives* at various stages in the discontinuance process had a compounding negative impact on final implementations. The strategic employment of coping mechanisms between individual events proved to have an increasingly constructive effect on actual terminations, producing less negative publicity and fewer law suits. The following details clarify these statements.

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Obstacles

Based on data gathered, eight categories of obstacles to program discontinuance were identified:

1. Legal aspects
   a. The lack of formal authority; absence of guiding policies to enforce curricular change and/or reductions
   b. The lack of new program approval or budget review authorities on the part of the agency
   c. The existence of unionized faculty and AAUP (American Association of University Professors) guidelines which often, *a priori*, preclude the serious consideration of reducing teaching staff
   d. The existence of "grandfather clauses" which prohibit new policies from being applied to previous arrangements.
2. Interactive issues
   a. Dilemmas inherent when agencies try to superimpose coordination in general and reduction in particular over a constituency which is accustomed to governing itself rather autonomously
   b. The practice of decentralized university governance which may present difficulties in encouraging either statewide or overall institutional retrenchment
   c. The need for funds and time to establish the additional layer of bureaucracy required to organize statewide program reviews and initiate curricular change
   d. Problems resulting from the physical distance between universities in some of the less populated states which make it difficult for agencies to insist that institutions develop and abide by clearly defined institutional missions.
3. Economic issues
   a. The absence of fiscal incentives to encourage program reduction or change (e.g., enrollment-driven funding formulae which currently have no "efficiency" incentives)
   b. The belief on the part of institutional officers that the closing of some programs may result in a reduction of state funds
   c. The belief on the part of many administrators that a program with only a few or no students in it is not a considerable cost item.
4. Political issues
   a. The rallying of alumni and members of unions or professional organizations behind a beleaguered discipline without considering the total state perspective
   b. The demand by legislators for program elimination without their being aware of all of the issues involved, thus contributing to the politicization of the entire process
   c. The circumvention by institutions of their state agency, going directly to the legislature and, possibly, causing the change process to become a political issue
   d. The support by legislators for their own *alma maters* (particularly in small states), a practice which may result in institutions being excused from participation in statewide reduction efforts
   e. The merger of interest groups (alumni, students, faculty, the public) which may result in powerful lobbying against attempts to reduce specific programs and, since large-scale lobbying tends to spill over into other areas, may also result in damaging the image of an agency for some time.
5. Definitional shortcomings
   a. The lack of agreement between agencies and institutions regarding the content of a proper program inventory or a good state master plan
   b. The absence of goals and objectives upon which both institutions and agencies agree.
6. Attitudinal issues
   a. The existence of tightly knit corps of executives who tend to perpetuate long-established institutional values and procedures and who may resent any kind of change initiation
   b. The disagreements over values and expectations among technocrats, politicians, and scholars regarding program quality, need, and efficiency
   c. The "burn out" of administrators as a result of unresolved issues in program evaluation and subsequent change.
7. Procedural issues
   a. Institutional program review procedures which are either inconsistent or too specific to be used by the agencies for state-level purposes
   b. The dilemmas encountered in determining who is best qualified to review programs—for instance, a problem which might arise over the use of consultants: if hired, the agency would be accused of handing decisions to outsiders; if not used, it might be criticized for lack of objectivity
   c. The absence of a buffer between institutional and state-level academic officers to protect the staff out on "the firing lines" (the availability of a sounding board or a catalyst in the form of a standing committee or academic council, however, having been found to be helpful in diffusing criticism).
8. Environmental issues
   a. Economic and sociopolitical uncertainty (e.g., growth? steady state? decline?)
   b. A particular state ideology (e.g., conservative) which may cause serious resistance to upgrading agency authority, supply requested data, or accepting recommendations
   c. The impact of a specific incident overshadowing all other efforts—for example, a highly publicized lawsuit, a change in governors or political parties, or other incident which may result in disequilibria in the personalities and values involved.

Coping Mechanisms

Agencies have begun efforts to overcome the identified obstacles. The study found that most of the problems are not reduction-specific but, instead, present continuing dilemmas and issues in higher education. There was recognition that it would be unrealistic to assume that these issues and dilemmas could now be dealt with in a formal and direct manner for the purpose of implementing curricular retrenchment. It seemed pertinent, however, based on ideas and suggestions extrapolated from policy cycle and termination literature, to identify the kinds of coping mechanisms which have been developed to deal with some of the obstacles and dilemmas.

The coping devices currently in use display either *constructive/positive* or *punitive/negative* attributes. The focus within the context of this paper is on those perceived by the agencies to have had a positive impact on the change process.

1. Agencies purposefully cultivate a reduction ideology by the following means:
   a. Announcing a new "era" which is advertised with a slogan such as "renewal through reduction" or "smaller and better"
   b. Appointing change-oriented people to key positions in order to break up change-resisting forces within the institution.
2. Agencies seek to clarify or modify their existing authority and procedures in these ways:
   a. Developing program discontinuance guidelines
   b. Reviewing and, possibly, amending their formal and informal policies regarding curricular change
   c. Soliciting input from institutions regarding program typologies, criteria, and data needs for the purpose of establishing mutually agreed-upon discontinuance procedures and goals
   d. Establishing additional procedures for institutions to appeal recommendations for change.
3. Agencies induce retrenchment by providing reduction incentives and/or rewards in the following ways:
   a. Stimulating programmatic change via trade-offs (e.g., approving new programs without allocating additional funds)
   b. Developing budgetary incentives (e.g., amending existing enrollment-driven budget formulae with specific cost and performance incentives)
   c. Emphasizing political advantages (e.g., goodwill for the institutions with the agency, the legislature, the appropriations committee, etc.).
4. Agencies simulate the implications of expected budget and/or enrollment declines in the following ways:
   a. Assisting in developing hiring ceilings
   b. Determining appropriate tenure/non-tenure ratios.
5. Agencies work toward the development of comparative data in these ways:
   a. Identifying appropriate criteria and their indicators
   b. Developing standards and norms for the purpose of lending objectivity to the decision-making process.
6. Agencies enhance the change process by these methods:
   a. Avoiding major confrontations which may result in a polarization of pro- and anti-change forces
   b. Preventing dramatic showdowns in court
   c. Avoiding the alienation of important power blocs such as alumni, specific disciplines, or political parties
   d. Providing buffer zones between institutions and agencies in the form of committees or academic councils.
7. Agencies recognize the plights of faculty affected by program closure, merger, or consolidation in these ways:
   a. Encouraging, or even subsidizing, the establishment of faculty retraining centers
   b. Providing job market information for faculty.
8. Agencies provide seed monies for the following purposes:
   a. Transforming declining programs into attractive new interdisciplinary programs, generic or thematic mergers, consortia or other arrangements
   b. Stimulating faculty to seek out research activities for the purpose of expanding their knowledge and making their positions more secure.
9. Agencies try to prevent the creation of new cost items by the following means:
   a. Monitoring new programs more closely
   b. Including in new program approval "sunset" provisions, which may state that a program will be terminated if certain expectations are not met.

Conceptual Coping Process Model

Although most states had employed some of the devices discussed here, none had considered using them in a systematic fashion—that is, in a planned, time-ordered sequence which would be most appropriate to the process of academic change. This paper conceptualizes a coping-process model of three phases and proposes a time-ordered sequence for them. The three phases are these: (1) incentives to induce reduction, (2) general coping devices, and (3) rewards for the effective implementation of curricular retrenchment. The phases need to be coordinated with the kind of program review process being used in a particular state or institution.

Phase 1. Development of incentives. Incentives are used to encourage institutions to become more oriented toward retrenchment. The entire incentive structure in a given state or institution may have to be reevaluated and, possibly, its orientation changed from that of growth to that of decline. This may be done by amending budget formulae with efficiency incentives or by providing seed money to initiate curricular change. Programmatically, this may be done by denying the approval of new programs unless "dead wood" is eliminated. Agencies might also find it helpful to provide institutions with information on possible program-reduction options such as the elimination of subspecialities or certain degree levels and generic or thematic mergers. It also could be emphasized that institutions might find a political incentive in the goodwill they could generate with the legislators and governor by their display of fiscal accountability.

Phase 2. Development of general coping devices. Coping devices are used to help overcome or circumvent the obstacles and dilemmas encountered in the change process. The assumption is that, for the most part, it is not realistic to expect that the identified hindrances could be eliminated *per se* but, rather, that they need to be overcome informally and indirectly. Some suggested strategies for use at the agency or institutional level follow:

1. Cultivate a reduction ideology.
2. Review legal authorities, program review procedures, and assess appeal possibilities.
3. Simulate budget and enrollment changes and suggest needed changes in policies which would accommodate expected declines and reductions.
4. Encourage the establishment of comparable data bases between institutions and the agency.
5. Avoid the forming of anti-change coalitions and dramatic showdowns in court which may result in bad press for all.
6. Provide buffers between agency and institutional officers.

7. Encourage and subsidize the establishment of faculty retraining centers and, possibly, provide regional job information to faculty.
8. Provide seed money for changing curricula, thus effecting mergers or consolidations, and for developing additional research activities.
9. Include "sunset" provisions in new program approvals.

Phase 3. Development of rewards. The purpose of developing rewards for having implemented curricular change is to maintain the reduction momentum beyond a particular review cycle. The main vehicle seems to be of a politico-economic nature. Institutions need to feel that their programs, faculty, and students have something to gain from eliminating underproductive programs. This may manifest itself in the agency providing support and information on the possibilities of establishing interdisciplinary and interinstitutional programs. Als , rewards for being retrenchment-conscious may becom visible in the institution's subsequent dealings with the state government.

The Role of the Institutional Researcher in the Closure Process

Since institutional research offices vary so greatly in their responsibilities, mission, and influence in the organizational apparatus, it is difficult to propose specific roles for their staff in the curricular change process. The following possibilities, however, are suggested:

1. Assist in conceptualizing a university/college-level program review process in line with the institution's degree of (de) centralization.
2. Identify appropriate data and estimate the cost and time involved in retrieving and interpreting them.
3. Function as a clearing house of information on program review models, program discontinuance case studies, organizational decline literature, AAUP guidelines with respect to financial exigency, as well as internal precedents on program reduction.
4. Analyze existing and potential modes of operation between the institution, other universities, and the state agency with respect to developing interinstitutional curricular arrangements, staffing review committees, sharing job-market information, and providing data for a comparative information base.
5. Assist in developing program discontinuance guidelines and sunset clauses for new programs.
6. Share experience in the use of computer data bases with college- and department-level people who are involved in the review process.

Conclusions

The basic suggestion here is that there may be an orderly way to consider, plan, and implement curricular change in general and program reduction in particular and by doing so, reduce some of the unpleasant surprises and barriers experienced previously. While many of the activities proposed are currently not being pursued systematically, it seems that state and institutional officials have learned from sharing their experiences with obstacles and coping devices. Some readers, for instance, may remember the many articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* a few years ago which dealt with a relatively small number of program discontinuations. In contrast, one state eliminated approximately 150 programs during 1979, but this sizeable reduction of programs was given very little attention in the press. The cultivation of a retrenchment climate, the development of proper review and appeal procedures, and the analysis of obstacles and incentive structures seem to indicate gradual success and reward for program reduction. Apparently a cultivated climate produces less publicity and fewer grievances, yet sound and realistic curricula for the future.

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